

Trends in Public Attitudes towards Abortion

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Abortion has long been a divisive and polarizing issue between pro-choice and pro-life advocates. But among the American public, most people hold moderate positions and are not at the ideological extremes. Approval of abortion is highest when the woman's health is seriously endangered (87.0% across all years, 1972-2012), followed by for pregnancies resulting from rape (78.3%), and a serious defect in the fetus (77.1%). But majorities have not approved where the family is too poor to afford another child (45.0%), when a married woman does not want more children (42.1%), when the woman is unmarried and does not want to marry the prospective father (42.0%), and when the woman wants the abortion for "any reason" (38.5% for 1977-2012). (For the wording of all other questions see Appendix 1: Question Wordings. For full percentages for all years, see the attached tables.) Examining the seven items asked from 1977 through 2012 altogether shows that on average 7.2% were absolutely pro-life, rejecting legal abortions for all reasons and 31.0% were totally pro-choice endorsing legal abortions for all reasons. That left the majority of 61.8% in the middle, favoring legal abortions for some reasons and opposing it for others. Even if those opposing legal abortions for six reasons and saying don't know for one reason are counted as totally pro-life, that group is only 8.1% and similarly if the completely pro-choice group includes those approving legal abortion for six reasons and unsure for one reason, it only increases to 31.8%. With these expansions the middle, conditional group is still a majority with 60.1%. As Figure 1 shows, support is bimodal, concentrated at the pro-choice end and then in the middle of the seven-item scale.

Support for the legalization of abortions moved up notably between 1972 and 1973 following the Supreme Court's Roe vs. Wade decision in January, 1973. The six abortion questions had increases in pro-legalization responses of 6.1-8.4 percentage points, averaging +6.9 points. Average support for the six questions then increased a little more for a period high in 1974. For the individual questions their high points were reached in 1973 for not wanting more children (46.7%), 1974 for health endangered (90.6%), low income (52.2%), and not wanting to marry (47.9%), 1977 for a serious birth defect (83.5%), and 1982 for pregnancy due to rape (84.0%). When the seventh item about a woman wanting an abortion for any reason was added to the scale in 1977, the extended scale hit its high point in 1982 and its low point in 2004 (with a second place low in 2006).

Support then generally declined moderately from the 1970s to low points in the 1990s or 2000s (Figure 2). As Figure 3 illustrates, approval of abortion in cases of rape has had a long-term decline. At its high point in 1974, 82.6% supported legalization for this reason, but at its low point in 2012 only 72.0% did so (- 10.6 points). Approval in the case of women's health and birth defects both dropped to lows in 2004, showing peak-to-trough declines respectively of -8.0 and -14.8 points.

Figure 4 indicates that support for social reasons has been more variable across time, but most also show some overall decline. Support for legal abortions when married women do not want any more children hit a low point in 1983 (37.3%) with a partial recovery in recent years reaching its second highest level (46.3%) in both 1994 and 2010. The top-to-bottom swing was -9.4 points. Favoring

abortions when a woman does not want to marry the prospective father also reached a low point in 1983 (36.1%). After a partial rebound in the 1990s, support then dipped again to a near record low in 2000 (36.2%). The overall swing in support was -11.8 points. Approval of legal abortions when a family cannot afford more children dropped by -13.5 points from 1974 to its low in 2004 and remains relatively low in 2012. Support for legal abortions when a woman wants it for “any reason,” follows a distinctive trend. It moved up from the late 1970s/early 1980s to its high point in 1994 (44.5%), slipped to lows in 2000 and 2004 (respectively of 37.0% and 37.6%) and moved back up to 42% in 2010-2012. The high-to-low shift was -12.7 points.

While abortion is often characterized as a women’s rights issue, there is little difference between men and women in their attitudes toward abortions and men are actually slightly more supportive of legalization (for all years running from +0.6 points for cases of birth defects to +3.6 points for not wanting 1more children and averaging +2.1 points for the seven items).

Age differences are more substantial than gender differences. In general, those over 65 are the least supportive. But the youngest age group (under 35) is on average the second lowest in favor of legal abortions. On six of the seven items the highest support is among those in the middle age groups (35-49 and 50-64). For example, while in 2012 33.2% of those 65+ favor abortions for “any reason,” this is backed by 40.0% of those under 35, 42.2% of those 50-64 and 47.9% of those 35-49. The main exception to this general pattern concerns abortions in cases of rape. The age differences are small and the highest support is among the under 35 group. In 2012, 75.5% of those under 35 favored legalization in cases of rape vs. 68.2-72.5% among older groups. This may be because sexual assaults are more common among younger women.

Support for legalizing abortions increases substantially with education. Across all years, the rise in support from among those without a high school degree to the college educated grows by +8.2 points in cases of the woman’s health being seriously endangered, +10.0 points for birth defects, +14.5 points for cases of rape, +21.4 points for low income, +25.0 points for not wanting to marry the prospective father, +25.2 points for not wanting more children, and +25.7 points for “any reason.”

The data in this report are from the General Social Survey. The GSSs are full probability, in-person samples of adults living in households in the United States. Data have been collected by NORC at the University of Chicago. Core support for the GSS comes from the National Science Foundation. Information on the GSS and the GSS data files are available at <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>.

Appendix 1: Question Wordings

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if... READ EACH STATEMENT

- a. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
- b. If she is married and does not want any more children?
- c. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
- d. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
- e. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
- f. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?
- g. The woman wants it for any reason?